

“SUNLIGHT (IN)SEPARABLE FROM SUN”:
POSTHUMAN INTRA-ACTIONS IN SWINBURNE’S
TRISTRAM OF LYONESSE

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Explaining why Algernon Charles Swinburne’s work lends itself well to digital media, John Walsh states, “he is a poet of complex thought, extended conceits, diverse forms, and extensive and rich allusions,” playing through what Walsh refers to as an “expansive though elusive or obscured range” (Walsh 29). He also defends Swinburne from T.S. Eliot’s charges of being impatient and lazy by pointing out the richness of Swinburne’s “index” of different binaries, words, and concepts that provides a key to his poetry. These concepts include the sea, the Bible and other literary works that Swinburne read and absorbed and laid out in his poetry, and Swinburne’s “trade-mark binary oppositions and pairings” such as “pain/pleasure, life/death, [and] love/hate” (Walsh 29). Such dense poetry that sprawls across boundaries also, I would argue, creates constantly changing assemblages of humans with elements of the natural world and human culture, including especially song and poetry itself. I use “assemblages” after the mode of Anna Tsing, who defines it in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* as “an open-ended entanglement of ways of being” (83). Such entanglements might not be noticed by the human inhabitants of them, who often see themselves as free and autonomous individuals, or having relationships with other members of our own species alone. Besides the Western concept of autonomy, Tsing indicates that one aspect of assemblages making them hard to notice is their nature in motion: “In an assemblage, varied trajectories gain a hold on each other, but indeterminacy matters” (83). Swinburne’s poetry reflects the semi-temporary nature of assemblages, their constant change and their ability to absorb new members and release old ones. In *Tristram of Lyonesse*, humans are not only deeply entangled with the natural world but sometimes notice and give voice to their perceptions of entanglement along with the narrative, making this poem a particularly posthuman exploration of intra-actions between humans, landscape, animals, plants, and different beyond-human others such as light and song.